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Bill Sparks, Last of the Cockleshell Heroes, Dies at 80

By RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

Bill Sparks, the last survivor of the 10 British marines celebrated as the Cockleshell Heroes for their canoe-borne raid on German shipping in occupied France in World War II, died last Saturday in Alfriston, England. He was 80.

On the evening of Dec. 7, 1942, five two-man teams of Royal marines were sent off in canoes, known as cockleshells, from the British submarine Tuna in the Bay of Biscay. Their mission was to paddle along the Gironde River for 75 miles or so, then sneak into the port of Bordeaux and attach mines to the hulls of German cargo ships that had evaded a British blockade. The British had decided against an aerial attack for fear of civilian casualties.

William Edward Sparks, a native of London, was an enlisted man who had served previously on the battlecruiser Renown. But he answered a call for volunteers to undertake an unspecified hazardous mission, hoping to avenge the combat death of a brother in the Royal Navy.

Three of the five canoes were lost en route to Bordeaux, their crewmen having drowned or been captured by the Germans and, eventually, shot.

Mr. Sparks and his canoe-mate, Herbert Hasler, the officer who commanded the raiders, paddled at night and laid up by day, concealing themselves from German sentries and patrol boats. Freezing and soaked, they sustained themselves with tea and rum and took sleeping pills to avoid being caught unawares during their daylight rest periods.

On the night of Dec. 11, they placed limpet mines -- explosive devices with timers -- on the sides of several German merchant ships at Bordeaux, but were almost crushed when they were briefly wedged between ships that had drifted together. The two crewmen of the other surviving marine canoe also laid mines. When the mines exploded hours later, they flooded four cargo ships and damaged a mine-clearing vessel, according to The Times of London.

After discarding their canoe, Mr. Sparks and Mr. Hasler walked 100 miles to the French village of Ruffec for a rendezvous with Resistance members, who took them to Spain. They were later transferred to Gibraltar, then returned to England. But the two members of the other team were captured in France and shot by the Germans.

King George VI presented the Distinguished Service Medal to Mr. Sparks and the Distinguished Service Order to Mr. Hasler.

Mr. Sparks worked as a bus driver in London after the war, then rejoined Mr. Hasler in 1955 when they provided technical assistance for the movie "The Cockleshell Heroes," starring Jose Ferrer, Victor Meddarn, Trevor Howard and Anthony Newley and filmed in England with the cooperation of the Royal Navy. Mr. Sparks also made an American tour to promote the film.

Writing in The New York Times, A. H. Weiler called the movie "a graphic dramatization of self-effacing men attaining valorous heights."

At age 61, Mr. Sparks re-enacted his canoe trip on the Gironde to raise money for cancer research.

He later fell on difficult financial times when his government pension was reduced by new tax rules. "I was told absolutely nothing could be done," The Daily Telegraph quoted him as saying at the time. "How can I feel anything else but bitter and disappointed."

He subsequently auctioned his eight war medals at Sotheby's in London. The anonymous high bidder placed the medals in Sotheby's vault and instructed that Mr. Sparks be permitted to wear them whenever he wished.

He told of his exploits in "The Last of the Cockleshell Heroes" (Leo Cooper, 1992), written with Michael Munn.

Mr. Sparks is survived by his second wife, Irene; three sons; and a daughter. His first wife, Violet, died in 1982.

Mr. Hasler, the only other marine to have survived the mission, later designed yachting equipment and founded the first single-handed trans-Atlantic race in 1960, finishing second to the famed sailor Francis Chichester. He died in 1987. The Sparks-Hasler escape route through France has become a hiking trail financed by the French regional authorities and contains markers dedicated to the Cockleshell Heroes. Last June, Mr. Sparks made a 60th anniversary visit to it. "Britain forgets things too quickly," he told The Times of London in December 2000, when plans for the trail were under way. "The French are better at remembering. The French people looked after us very well then, and they are looking after us very well now."